Unfolding Orientalism in Art: How John Frederick Lewis Broke the Mold

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Unfolding Orientalism in Art: How John Frederick Lewis Broke the Mold

Abstract
In the 19th century during the artistic career of John Frederick Lewis, artists were painting romantic scenes of exotic Middle Eastern lands and characters, especially the scenes most desired by Western Europeans, the harem. The later term coined by Edward Said for this genre and aesthetic is “Orientalism,” referring to the inequality of power created by white European colonization. Middle Eastern cultures were depicted and seen as less civilized, primitive, and sensual. Lewis, at first glance, seems to be no exception to this genre and attitude. However, this study explores the so-called Orientalist works by this little known artist. By examining theoretical discourses regarding Orientalism, Feminism (especially concerning the gaze), and Post-Colonialism, this study will show not only the convoluted issues involved in discussing such 19th century romantic paintings, but also provide new interpretations and insight into Lewis’s lifestyle and artwork. This study shows that Lewis is not the typical artist painting the imaginary East to fulfill the expected requirements, but was a participant of a cultural intersection. I propose that Lewis and his work can be best understood through the lens of hybridity, where he was no longer the colonizer painting the colonized. Rather, Lewis attempts to bridge the unbridgeable gap between the East and the West.

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Unfolding Orientalism in Art:  
How John Frederick Lewis Broke the Mold

by

Alexandria M. Nanneman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

B.A. Art History

Pacific University

Approved by Professor Rebecca L. Twist, Ph.D.  
Chairperson of Supervisory Committee

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ABSTRACT

In the 19th century during the artistic career of John Frederick Lewis, artists were painting romantic scenes of exotic Middle Eastern lands and characters, especially the scenes most desired by Western Europeans, the harem. The later term coined by Edward Said for this genre and aesthetic is “Orientalism,” referring to the inequality of power created by white European colonization. Middle Eastern cultures were depicted and seen as less civilized, primitive, and sensual. Lewis, at first glance, seems to be no exception to this genre and attitude. However, this study explores the so-called Orientalist works by this little known artist. By examining theoretical discourses regarding Orientalism, Feminism (especially concerning the gaze), and Post-Colonialism, this study will show not only the convoluted issues involved in discussing such 19th century romantic paintings, but also provide new interpretations and insight into Lewis’s lifestyle and artwork. This study shows that Lewis is not the typical artist painting the imaginary East to fulfill the expected requirements, but was a participant of a cultural intersection. I propose that Lewis and his work can be best understood through the lens of hybridity, where he was no longer the colonizer painting the colonized. Rather, Lewis attempts to bridge the unbridgeable gap between the East and the West.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Fascination and conflict have existed for Western Europeans towards the Middle East for many centuries. During the 19th century, British travelers got their first glimpse of Islamic mosques, Eastern deserts, and exotic people either through first-hand experience or armchair travelling through books. Consequently, British artists desired to fill the demand for its audience’s love of the Orient by painting exotic and foreign pictures. The British artist John Frederick Lewis lived in Egypt for a decade (1840-1850), returning to London to complete masterful works in oils and watercolors. His paintings were so ambitious in detail and conceptual compositions that they lack full understanding even today. Emily M. Weeks in her essay “Cultures Crossed: John Frederick Lewis and the Art of Orientalist Painting” states, “Lewis took great care to confuse nationalist issues . . . in adopting the lifestyle of a well-to-do Turkish ‘bey’. Not quite the average Egyptian, and no longer overtly British, Lewis crafted an identity for which existing terminologies fall short.”1 Lewis’s lifestyle in Egypt entranced British citizens before they ever saw his paintings, and his harem scenes also charmed 19th century viewers and critics.

The artwork of John Frederick Lewis has recently reentered the art world’s public sphere of knowledge in that it is being bought and researched. He is most famous for his Egyptian scenes inspired by the ten years he lived in Cairo. Art Historical scholarship

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typically interprets Lewis’s works as Orientalist art. However, the social fascination that spawned Orientalist art creates a difficult problem for the modern world with what to do exactly with Lewis’s paintings or how to interpret them. It would appear that Lewis succeeded in leaving a puzzle with a conflicting mix of knowledge and images that seem as if they will forever be an enigma. In this study of John Frederick Lewis and his artworks, I attempt to unravel the mystery and provide alternative interpretations. I will show that aesthetics and cultural context can inform viewers about Lewis’s paintings.

This thesis reevaluates the current identification of John Frederick Lewis in order to discover a better view instead of the negative Orientalist binaries used to describe Lewis’s paintings thus far. The research presented here aims to fill the void in scholarship regarding attention paid to Lewis’s art in biographical and analytical views, and as such, refutes typical Orientalist analysis and catalogue of Lewis’s art to propose a new interpretation.

**Methodology**

The methodology used for this art historical thesis to interpret Lewis’s artwork includes a formal visual analysis as well as contextual approaches considering cultural, social, historical, and political forces that helped shape his artworks. One theory discussed and utilized for this study includes Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. The interpretations through Orientalism are then disproven using Feminist theory especially regarding the gaze. This includes Jacques Lacan’s theory of the gaze, the male gaze, the female gaze, and mixed-gender gazes. Through an analysis using Post-Colonial theory,
specifically the branch of hybridity, I provide a new interpretation for Lewis’s artwork, which features a dialogical component of the Western and Egyptian cultures.

Primary Visual Sources

The primary sources for this study are two paintings by John Frederick Lewis. The first is called The Hhareem from 1849. This painting is a watercolor that is 88.6 × 133 cm and is part of a private collection from Osaka, Japan. The second painting by Lewis is An Intercepted Correspondence from 1869. This painting is oil on a panel that is 51.4 × 89 cm and the whereabouts of this painting are unknown.²

Literature Review

This thesis involves the understanding of a single artist’s lifestyle and artwork, an artist, in particular, who evades current scholarship regarding his biography and paintings exclusively. The literature involved in this study expands over studies of Orientalist painting by British artists in the 19th century, where the artist John Frederick Lewis’s name would be mentioned along with other Orientalist painters. Few scholars or texts focus on him alone, and most who mentioned Lewis did so only in regards to his ten years of living in Egypt, on which he based most of his Orientalist painting. Therefore, this thesis provides a new source that focuses on Lewis, especially in its use of theory when interpreting Lewis’s paintings – both Orientalism and Post-Colonialism.

² Photographs of this are available by Jenni Carter; see Mary Roberts, Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), Plate 7.
Mary Roberts published the most biographical information on Lewis that I found in two chapters of her book *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*. Roberts’ account of Lewis’s life, however, is predominately from the published travel log by the author and friend of Lewis, William Makepeace Thackeray. Thackeray’s book is called, *Notes on Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*. In her book, Roberts also provides a visual analysis of a number of Lewis’s paintings, including *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence*. Both of these paintings are the focus of this thesis. As her title suggests, Roberts is using the Orientalist theory to decipher Lewis’s paintings.

Another important source that focuses on John Frederick Lewis and his art as Orientalist painting is Emily M. Weeks’s essay, “Cultures Crossed: John Frederick Lewis and the Art of Orientalist Painting.” Weeks also provides limited biographical information on the artist, his lifestyle while living in Egypt, and in-depth interpretations of his works with regards to the contemporary social climate of Egypt at the time of Lewis’s stay. The latter has only recently become the focus of attention to British society. Weeks especially offers valuable information regarding interpretation of Lewis’s painting *The Hhareem* and details that are otherwise missing from scholarship.

The theoretical component in this investigation begins with Edward Said and his book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. He discusses the discourses between the imperial West and colonized East or Orient. Said is basically telling scholars that the perceptions of the West are not objective because they observe cultural differences through the

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3 Roberts, 22.
4 Weeks, 22-32.
distorted lens of “Orientalism.” The discussion of Said’s theory of Orientalism provides the basis for understanding how art historians use the term “Orientalism,” and to understand the underlying ideas and motivations for the 19th century artists whose artworks depict the exotic Orient.

Because Said’s theory did not discuss art, art historians have had to apply his theory when interpreting art that depicts the Orient, or any art portraying a colonized culture through the eyes of their colonizer. Linda Nochlin applied Said’s theories to 19th century art in her article “The Imaginary Orient,” by successfully applying the binaries of colonized and colonizer and Arabic and European. Her analysis includes studies of Jean Léone Gérôme’s *The Snake Charmer* and Eugène Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Nochlin focuses on the recent interest and exhibitions of Orientalist art and on the question of if Orientalist art should be considered in “a new and less value-laden canon.” These questions are applied in this study as it similarly discusses the importance of these artworks.

Cultural studies have evolved since and in direct relation to Said’s theory, where Post-Colonialism takes Said’s dominating Western view and begins to observe the cultural intersection of the two, especially from the perspective of the colonized. Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk’s *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* provide criticism for Said’s theory as well as discuss Post-Colonial theory and its two main branches. The branch used in this study associates cross-cultural experience with

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7 Nochlin, 289.
hybridity; two different cultures change each other when they intersect. Hatt and Klonk describe an exhibit where primitive artifacts are shown next to the modern art it inspired and how James Clifford, an anthropologist, took issue with the idea of affinity: “the idea that different peoples share something that transcends culture and history.” From this, I took Clifford’s rejection of hybridity as a term for homogenization and continued to explore hybridity with regards to the blending and fusion of two cultures with regards to Lewis’s unique lifestyle and art. In addition, another helpful Post-Colonial study was David Craven’s, “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art; A Post-Colonial Approach to ‘American’ Art.” He provides a powerful argument for hybridity in terms of Abstract Expressionism artists and Native American and Afro-American cultures. Their cultural fusion is further support of my theory regarding Lewis.

My thesis involves many aspects of theory and analysis that require a wide range of information surrounding the topic of British Orientalist Painting, including Arabic architectural elements used in Lewis’s paintings and aspects of Eastern culture. For this portion of my research, Nicholas Tromans essays in The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting provided ample material for which to build an argument regarding a visual analysis of Lewis’s paintings and information on Egyptian people and culture. Tromans wrote five of the eight essays on Orientalist painting in Lure of the East beginning with the introduction. “Introduction: British Orientalist Painting,” which explains the current surge in interest for these works. The essays from which this thesis

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9 Hatt and Klonk, 231.
excerpts most from are, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople” and “Harem and Home.” Both of these essays tackle gender perspectives in and out of the harems, which are useful because both Lewis’s paintings, The Hhareem and An Intercepted Correspondence, represent scenes of harems. Tromans’s understanding of gender roles, Islamic cultures and customs, the lives of Arabic men and women, and harem life provided much of the knowledge regarding these aspects in the argument of this thesis.

While the information regarding Lewis may have been sparse, the discussions surrounding the theories of Feminism, Orientalism, and Post-Colonialism, as well as Orientalist painting are rich in perspective. The literature surrounding these topics provided copious perceptions and assessments of the genre and peers that surround Lewis. Thus, I was given a wide-range of scholarship and background to inspire my ideas and to use as evidence.
CHAPTER II

JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS

Sadly, there is very little biographical information available on John Frederick Lewis. Both buyers and scholars had all but forgotten Lewis’s works for decades until a recent surge in interest for his paintings within the art world. The recent interest has brought great attention to the period of time that Lewis lived in Cairo, Egypt because it is believed to have inspired his artistic style and subject matter and, as such, has become that for which he is most known. His body of artworks depicting scenes of Egypt is seen as his most prolific achievements.

A few personal details regarding John Frederick Lewis’s life can be found dispersed through several texts and articles from his own time period. In my research, the most are notably from Mary Robert’s Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature, which published excerpts from a travel log, Notes on a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo, by an author and a friend of Lewis, William Makepeace Thackeray.11 Thackeray writes about the artist’s life while he was living in Cairo. Thackeray was one of the many privileged Victorian’s allowed to travel to Egypt due to the newfound ease through technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution. According to Roberts, Thackeray’s account of Lewis’s life was created during a casual visitation to Cairo that lasted no more than a week in 1844.12 Lewis lived in Cairo for ten years, from 1840 to 1850, though the information about why Lewis went is unknown or has not been published. Thackeray’s travel log was first published while

11 Roberts, 22.
12 Roberts, 19.
the artist still lived in Cairo in 1846.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, the book was well known by British citizens before Lewis even exhibited his first work, \textit{The Hhareem}, in 1850 at the Old Watercolor Society in London to which Lewis was a member.\textsuperscript{14}

Thackeray portrayed Lewis to British society as having fully assimilated into Egyptian life, which therefore gave him the authority to represent Egyptian people and scenes with the full support and trust of British viewers.\textsuperscript{15} The Victorian view of being fully assimilated meant that Lewis dressed, lived and acted like a native Egyptian. Lewis lived in an Arabic part of town in Cairo away from tourist destinations and hotels for the typical European traveler, living more like a local than a visitor. Thackeray recounted Lewis’s living quarters as “picturesque and quintessentially Oriental”.\textsuperscript{16} It is accepted, however, that sometimes Thackeray’s excerpts had tendencies to slip into fantasy language and play with the actual facts. For example, he describes his first encounter with Lewis in Egypt:

He wears a very handsome, grave costume of dark blue, consisting of an embroidered jacket and gaiters, and a pair of trousers, which would make a set of dresses for an English family. His beard curls nobly over his chest, his Damascus scimitar on his thigh. His red cap gives him a venerable and Bey-like appearance.\textsuperscript{17}

A “bey” refers to a Turkish lord who typically owned a harem of women and this parallel, drawn by Thackeray, created a narrative for Lewis that compared him to a harem

\textsuperscript{13} Roberts, 20.  
\textsuperscript{14} Roberts, 20.  
\textsuperscript{15} Roberts, 21.  
\textsuperscript{16} Roberts, 22.  
\textsuperscript{17} Roberts, 23.
master, going so far as to allude to his readers that Lewis, in fact, owned a harem.\textsuperscript{18} Lewis did not have a harem, but he did marry an Egyptian woman. In England though, Lewis was mostly remembered as a ‘dandy’ or a gentleman.\textsuperscript{19} Although Thackeray’s description can be seen as slightly exaggerated truths, Lewis’s absence of Victorian lifestyle and costume displayed his own disregard for the modernity of contemporary, British life and his preference for Egypt.

Lewis eventually returned to England in 1850 to live in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. There he produced many of his famous paintings with the help of his Egyptian wife, Marian, who served as his model for Egyptian women in his numerous depictions of Turkish harem scenes.\textsuperscript{20} It was at this time that Lewis painted dozens of Egyptian scenes, reflecting his change to a new subject matter and style. This will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. Lewis himself left no personal record of his time in Egypt, but what is inferred later from his paintings is that the trip had a profound impression on his life and work.

It is known that Lewis’s career as a painter was established before his life in Egypt. At that time, he was especially known for paintings of animals and genre scenes.\textsuperscript{21} He left England for Cairo in 1837, travelling through Istanbul on his route.\textsuperscript{22} According to Roberts, Lewis was one of the few British artists to spend any length of time in North Africa and Egypt during this time period. Upon his return to England and after producing his new Egyptian subject matter in his new style, he was considered a prominent harem

\textsuperscript{18} Roberts, 23.  
\textsuperscript{19} Roberts, 24.  
\textsuperscript{20} Roberts, 39.  
\textsuperscript{21} Roberts, 22.  
\textsuperscript{22} Roberts, 22.
artist, if only because British society regularly associated him with it. Emily Weeks says Lewis that when Lewis returned to England he stayed separated from society in an “elusive” manner. Lewis’s 19th century viewers were interested, respectful and fascinated by his Egyptian scenes, but ultimately unaware of the details that Lewis incorporated into them that make his work so interesting to scholars today.

It is important to note that during the time that John Frederick Lewis spent in Egypt, that country was undergoing drastic political and social changes. In 1840, when Lewis arrived, political power had just recently been reestablished. After many years under the Ottoman rule of the Turkish Empire, the Egyptian Muhammad ‘Ali came into power and challenged the weak Ottoman rule. Although not officially a colony yet, the major powers in the West like England, France, Austria, Russia and Germany all had their eye on Egypt. England, therefore, kept a strong economic and military presence in Egypt. According to Stacy Miyagawa, “Western Colonial dominance as a whole expanded from about 35 to 85 percent of the earths surface between 1815 to 1914.” Napoleon had tried to invade Egypt in 1798, but was removed by the British. Thus, France and England especially competed for domination of the region during the 19th century.

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23 Roberts, 22.
24 Weeks, 26.
25 Weeks, 28.
27 Miyagawa, 13.
28 Before many of the British travelers visited, Napoleon Bonaparte produced a great collection of images and texts (multiple volumes from 1809), with help from a caravan of academics and explorers, which recorded as many aspects of Egypt as possible; see Miyagawa, 13.
Egypt did not become an official colony of Britain until after Lewis’s stay, but political tension that sparked British interest in the area heightened in 1840 when Muhammad ‘Ali’s aggressive attempts at expansion attempted to disrupt England’s valuable trade routes to India.  

*29* Muhammad ‘Ali was suppressed by an alliance among his common enemies, the British included, but he was left in charge and kept in check.  

According to Weeks, Muhammad ‘Ali used reform to keep Egypt in a state of progress that imitated the Parisian Haussmannization going on in France.  

For example, printing presses were established, foreign diplomats were invited to Egypt, and Egyptian diplomats were sent abroad, introducing many new outside ideas and cultures.  

All the while, however, Egypt continued to be the desired colonial prize.  

In addition, many things were changed to encourage tourism in Egypt while some traditional aspects were disappearing in lieu of modernization, such as mashrabiyyas (carved, wood, lattice windows) and other similar things that characterized Egyptian architecture.  

For example, Muhammad ‘Ali commissioned palaces and mosques to be built in both Turkish and European styles, banning the addition of traditional lattice windows in the 1840’s to be replaced with European style rectangular windows, some with glass panes.  

Like the modern changes happening in Britain and France, some

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29 Weeks, 28.  
30 Weeks, 28.  
31 Weeks, 28-29.  
33 Weeks, 28.  
34 Roberts, 28.
changes seemed suspect and others seemed only positive. An example of a positive change included more religious tolerance, previously unheard of in Egypt, where Christian church bells were finally allowed to ring.\textsuperscript{35} Muhammad ‘Ali’s rule gained respect for Egypt on a global stage, as well as pleasing its citizens, which earned him their support. Interestingly, John Frederick Lewis even met and painted a portrait of Muhammad ‘Ali. Roberts mentions that she wonders what sort of dress he might have worn to the meeting - European or Egyptian?\textsuperscript{36} My guess is that he probably wore a more European style attire to the meeting than Egyptian. While he probably did not fool the Egyptian’s with his adoption of local costumes, back home, his British contemporary audiences did not question his acceptance into Egyptian society because of Thackeray’s account. Lewis was hence an authority figure on Egyptian culture.

In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, at the height of Lewis’s career, approximately the 1840’s and 50’s, the emphasis was placed on his personal life and experience; however, today scholarly attention is on what his paintings accomplished and meant. The advancements and innovations that occurred in the two cultures of Britain and Egypt during this time provided the framework for contemporary cultures in those respective countries. Western culture was first to experience the Industrial Revolution, and the profound social and technological changes that occurred as a result from this ushered it into modern times. This did not spurn colonization since imperial ambitions had been around for centuries, but it did make travel, military prowess, and power a more viable option over the Middle East, India and parts of Africa. It was during this crucial period in history that John Frederick Lewis took his experiences from London to Cairo, and later vice versa. This,

\textsuperscript{35} Weeks, 29.
\textsuperscript{36} Roberts, 29.
therefore, is the pinnacle of his cross-cultural experience. Lewis himself represented a
British metropolitan man, but once he lived and assimilated into Egyptian culture, he
began to confuse nationalist ideals both personally (with his lifestyle and dress) and
socially (with his artwork).
CHAPTER III

JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS AND ORIENTALISM

Romanticism and the Exotic

During the 19th century, artists were fascinated with depicting scenes from the Orient or the Far East, including countries of North Africa, the Middle East, India, and China. As part of the Romantic artistic movement (especially 1800-1840), they wanted to give precedence to feelings and imagination, often through the sublime emotions of awe or terror. As a result, they painted exotic far away places or erotic women to appeal to the thrill of the imagination. These also included scenes of the exotic Egyptian landscapes and its culture, some featuring Arabic architectural elements, such as mosques, teardrop shaped towers or portals and the mashrabiyyas or lattice windows. Artists also depicted exotic contemporary Arabic or Islamic garments, such as turbans, fezzes, galabeyas (decorative robes), or colorful, embroidered cloths. The people from these exotic cultures were also represented, including harem women, Turkish beys, the slave trade, and male and female interactions. In addition, the Romantic artistic style was most typically naturalistic, using academic techniques and perspectives, but made more exciting by using bright colors like foreign spices, chaotic scenes with dynamic poses and movement, and subjects embodying an essence of danger or dangerous sexuality.

A perfect example of a Romantic painting representing these ideas and style can be found in Eugène Delacroix’s The Death of Sardanapalus from 1827 (Figure 1). It has an exotic theme of the last king of ancient Assyria, Sardanapalus, ordering all of his

37 Eisenman et al, 59.
concubines and slaves to be murdered so they can die with him. His enemies are at his gates and he prefers to die on a funeral pyre rather than be captured.\(^{38}\) There are men in foreign costumes with turbans, a dark slave man reining in a horse covered in jewels, and naked women strewn about the canvas. Typical of the style, the scene is dynamic, it is detailed, and the colors are rich, warm, and vibrant, reminiscent of the popular spices that were exported from the region. The character of Sardanapalus was popularly known as a key figure from a poem by Lord Byron (a Romantic poet).\(^{39}\) Like the Romantic painters, Delacroix paints this exotic scene completely from his own imagination, and likely his fantasies as well. Some artists never even traveled to the exotic locations they chose to depict. If they did travel to the locations, they still often painted scenes that would have been beyond the realm of possibility within that given social structure or they exaggerated subject matter using their fantasies. For example, Delacroix later went to Morocco in 1832 to document a diplomatic trip of Count Mornay, however, his later paintings such as the *Women of Algiers* were still made in a similar Romantic vein (Figure 2).\(^{40}\) The Romantic artists painted these scenes because the public audiences and wealthy patrons appreciated and demanded them.

**Orientalism**

This 19\(^{th}\) century fascination with these exotic cultures was termed as “Orientalism” by Edward Said in 1978. In his book, *Orientalism*, Said tries to answer the question why people from the West had and continue to have preconceived notions of

\(^{38}\) Eisenman et al, 83-84.  
\(^{39}\) Eisenman et al, 83-84.  
\(^{40}\) Eisenman et al, 83-84.
people from the Middle East, also called the Orient, without any evidence of first-hand experience. Said defined Orientalism in several ways. He states that it is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” Therefore, he suggests that the West constructs a division between West and East that turns into a division of artistic, educational, economical, sociological, historical, and philosophical texts. Said is proposing that this division allows and justifies the Western dominance over the East or Orient. This dominance ranges from imperialistic control through colonization to even discrimination and representation of the Orient. Said summaries his ideas:

My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness . . . As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge.

As such, Said is explaining that the Westerners coerced people from the Orient into submission because they saw the people as weaker due to the differences between their cultures, which allowed the West to control the East politically and culturally through social aggression.

Said points out that there is a paradox that exists within the theory of Orientalism and it is that when the West, as the hegemonic culture, assumes the power of defining Egypt, in doing so the dominant culture points out what the other is not. For the British to contrast themselves to Egypt, in this case, is to say what separates Egyptian society

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41 Said, 3.
42 Said, 12.
43 Said, 204.
44 Said, 12.
from normative culture. The British assumptions about Egypt and its people were not a conclusive or balanced view that could accurately describe Egyptian culture. Rather, for the British this was more conclusively a task of redefining themselves, by addressing everything they are not, although the British did not realize that was what they were doing. They thought they were defining the Orient. This act of discrimination sets all other cultures at odds with the dominate, white, European culture and creates what Said discussed as “the other,” meaning the dominate culture is the best.\textsuperscript{45}

According to Said, the perceptions of the West are therefore not objective because they use the distorted lens of “orientalism” to look at the East and that motivates commonly held stereotypes.\textsuperscript{46} This relationship between Western and Eastern societies creates a power dynamic in which the East is the lesser or the ‘other’. Said specifically explains that ideas, cultures, and histories are only understood when their configurations of power have also been studied.\textsuperscript{47} So along with imperialistic colonization, 19\textsuperscript{th} century travellers also controlled Egypt and its people ideologically through Orientalism. By Europeans representing Egyptian people and their cultures in Orientalist art, they imposed on the Egyptian identity what they were supposed to be. It could be said that Arabic people have come to fulfill Western ideas of themselves by believing they are lesser than Western society.\textsuperscript{48} The West’s vision of the East contains vast generalizations about Islamic and Arabic cultures that have survived into contemporary times as an eternal image, yet it defies history or reason.

\textsuperscript{45} Said, 38-41.
\textsuperscript{46} Said, 273.
\textsuperscript{47} Said, 26.
\textsuperscript{48} Said, 65-67.
As a result of Said’s theory, art historians also used his term “Orientalism” to describe the underlying ideas and motivations for the 19\textsuperscript{th} century artists whose artworks depict the exotic Orient, such as Delacroix’s work previously mentioned. Nicholas Tromans writes in his essay “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” that critics claim that the Orientalist genre never reached levels of symbolism or social criticism that other genres of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century were producing, such as Realism. Rather, they are seen as flights of fancy and imagination prone to the Romantic artists.\footnote{Nicholas Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” in \textit{The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting}, ed. by Nicholas Tromans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 84.} Moreover, these Western artists were attributed with the same notions of power and dominance over the East as discussed by Said.

Interestingly though, Said’s book \textit{Orientalism} does not deal with Orientalist art itself. In a later interview, which can be viewed on YouTube, Said explained that \textit{Orientalism} was inspired by the great art he saw that depicted Arabic people.\footnote{“Edward Said On Orientalism,” YouTube video, 40:31, posted by “abumiz,” October 28, 2012, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYdZ_g}.} Being a Palestinian, it interested him how differently his experience was with how his peers were portrayed in art. The Art Historian Linda Nochlin, however, used Said’s theory in her essay “The Imaginary Orient,” which uses Orientalism to discuss several 19\textsuperscript{th} century paintings. Nochlin argued that political implications must be considered to understand the power struggles that exist within Orientalism.\footnote{Nochlin, 297.} She says the two disciplines - the study and theory of Orientalism and Orientalist painting - should be united to be truly critical in the study of Orientalist artists and their works. Nochlin argues that the Orientalist artists are to be held accountable for the images that they created. This means that artists like

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Nicholas Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” in \textit{The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting}, ed. by Nicholas Tromans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 84.}
  \item \footnote{“Edward Said On Orientalism,” YouTube video, 40:31, posted by “abumiz,” October 28, 2012, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYdZ_g}.}
  \item \footnote{Nochlin, 297.}
\end{itemize}
Lewis created works of art in the 19th century that are studied through a certain lens today of Orientalism, but they have no ability to defend or discuss how this really applies to their paintings. This especially applies to Lewis who left complex paintings without descriptions in the hands of critical theorists to impose whatever ideas they would like on his multifaceted and complicated works. This creates certain questions. What makes an artist an Orientalist artist? What makes a work of art Orientalist art?

**An Orientalist Interpretation of Lewis’s Paintings**

It is no surprise that Lewis’s pictures of Egypt are labeled as Orientalist. His Oriental or Egyptian desert and market scenes are seen as exotic landscapes. His characters wear turbans, fezzes, *galabeyas*, and veils, as well as brightly colored or embroidered cloth. Lewis’s themes deal with male and female interaction, slavery, and, most popularly, harems with sexually charged portrayals of women. Most of his compositions were so detailed and naturalistic that Victorian viewers took them for accurate studies of Egyptian society and culture.

*The Hhareem*

One of Lewis’s paintings labeled as Orientalist is *The Hhareem* painted in 1850, in watercolor (Figure 3). It is the only Orientalist type of artwork he completed while still living in Egypt, depicting a harem scene.\(^{52}\) Thanks to William Thackeray’s preceding novel, Lewis was already well known to the public and this painting marked his arrival as

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\(^{52}\) Roberts, 31.
an Orientalist painter. The European audience was enthralled with the composition aided by the fact that this was one painting for which Lewis provided a rare explanation of his narrative. Nicholas Tromans writes in his essay, “Harem and Home,” that Lewis gave a full description of this painting when it was shown at a show in Edinburgh in 1853. The description states that the painting depicts a harem master seated on the left who is considering purchasing the standing Abyssinian slave to the right of the center of the painting. She clutches her simple white garment and looks at the ground shyly. The harem master seems excited by the display as he leans forward towards the girl. In the composition, a veiled woman sits in the hallway in the deep background of the painting. In Lewis’s explanation, she is the slave dealer’s wife, a *fellaheen*. The wife represents gender social norms. As Roberts explains, the male slave dealer who currently owns the Abyssinian is not allowed in the harem, so his wife must present the slave to the buyer. Because she is another man’s wife, she must hide her face with a veil from the harem master. Thus, men and women’s roles in Egyptian society, according to social norms, were strict about the appropriate place for men and women, especially within the harem, as well as being strict about women covering themselves from view.

The three wives of the harem master sit near him on the left and scrutinize the new potential member. Tromans also gives Lewis’s ethnical background of these three wives, having labeled them from left to right as Georgian, Circassian and Greek. There are also two dark-skinned women who are slaves and two other unknown females

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53 Roberts, 31.
55 Roberts, 33.
56 Roberts, 33.
57 Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 132.
emerging from the hallway. Despite the fact that she is almost nude, there is another reason why the Abyssinian slave is the center of attention. Lewis notes that although she will be bought as a slave, she will potentially become the harem master’s fourth wife, and therefore, the viewer is to assume that his three wives were all previously concubines.\(^5^8\)

The exoticness is rampant in the variety of ethnicities and costumes, the Egyptian harem setting, the Arabic architecture and the *mashrabiyyas* or lattice windows, the detailed Oriental vases and fabrics, and even through the presence of the native Egyptian gazelles. With all of this relevant information, it is easy to interpret that this painting exudes Orientalism in its social dynamics of gender roles and promiscuous sexuality.

Lewis’s watercolor techniques used in *The Hhareem* also associate this painting with Orientalism. The details of *The Hhareem* go beyond making the canvas appear like a three-dimensional window into the real world. As Nochlin clearly argues in her study of Orientalist art, the goal of these artists was to make their viewers forget that any painting was actually involved in this picture, in other words, what the viewer was seeing was “‘reflections’” or “scientific . . . exactitude.”\(^5^9\) For example, *The Hhareem* was recognized by contemporary art critics as “extraordinary” and “remarkable” in the *Art Journal* and *The Athenaeum* because of Lewis’s great attention to detail, the effects of the light, and its layered surface.\(^6^0\) Items with extreme detail that draw the viewer’s attention are the feathery quality of the peacock feathers, the soft fur of the gazelles, and the folds of silk fabric in the curtains and costumes.

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\(^5^8\) Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 132.

\(^5^9\) Nochlin, 291.

\(^6^0\) Roberts, 31.
In addition, the highly detailed Islamic architecture works to enhance the realism of the composition, but most importantly it allows Lewis to utilize the dramatic effects of light. The lattice windows to the left of the harem room allow luminescent light to fall on the harem master while he observes his potential purchase. It also leaves dappled light on a variety of surfaces. The mashrabiyya windows are not only distinctly Arabic in design, but are also used as powerful symbolic tools for the artists who were aware of these capabilities. On one hand, the perforation in their design was culturally functional in that it let in light and fresh air into the upper quarters and rooms of the houses. The windows also allowed the occupants to look out while preventing outside glances from seeing in. Women in their quarters were not to be seen. I suggest that in an Orientalist interpretation the lattice windows are symbolic of the British attempt to observe and define Egyptian culture from the outside, yet failing to penetrate the cultural barrier. As such, they really did not see anything accurate and were not depicting factual information.

Moreover, Lewis’s use of perspective or viewpoint adds another level of Orientalist meaning, referring to the focus of the erotic female. The Orientalist focus on the erotic female is evident in *The Hhareem* because Lewis uses one-point linear perspective to draw the viewer’s eye to the nude female. This suggests that the nude female is on display not only for the harem master, but also for the Victorian viewer. Thus, it would appear that that there is an Orientalist reading of *The Hhareem* not only through subject matter and style, but also through what was considered to be the sexual extravagance of Islamic law and culture. I will show in the next chapter that this is a gross assumption.
Later in 1869, John Frederick Lewis painted *An Intercepted Correspondence* in oil that is in some ways a direct replica of *The Hhareem* (Figure 4). Therefore, scholars also label it as an Orientalist painting. The scene occurs in the same harem room with nearly the same arrangement of characters. Therefore, the understanding of this work as Orientalist is very similar to *The Hhareem* in its exotic location, costumes, in the detailed objects and architecture, the harem setting, and the implied interaction between male and erotic female characters for the male Victorian viewers. There is still a harem master and his three wives, a servant girl against the wall, a servant man behind the women in focus, and people littering the hallway. However, in *An Intercepted Correspondence*, the harem master is changed to be a much older man with a great white beard, and he is scrutinizing two women instead of the one Abyssinian slave. The title refers to the meaning of the painting where one of the women has been found out as having an illicit romance.\(^\text{61}\)

According to Roberts, the small bundle of flowers held by the women bending towards the harem master reveals that a symbolic love message has been seized by the other woman and is being offered as evidence to the harem master against the transgressor.\(^\text{62}\)

The composition is now crowded and chaotic. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to the posture of the woman holding the transgressors hand while exposing her to the harem master. The fabric on the wives’ costumes obscures the small bundle of flowers that she holds in her hand as evidence. In the foreground of the painting, several items have been added that take away attention from the narrative, such as a table with fruit on it and a woman reclining. According to Roberts, the critics claimed that the sheer amount of

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\(^\text{61}\) Roberts, 44.

\(^\text{62}\) Roberts, 44.
detail in *An Intercepted Correspondence* was exhausting instead of intriguing, and that Lewis brought too much attention to details in the objects rather than having compositional unity.\(^{63}\)

I agree with Roberts claim that Lewis’s change to the right side of the painting with the two women confuses the focus.\(^ {64}\) It takes the focus away from eroticism and changes it to oppression or control. The woman being scrutinized is no longer being purchased or considered as a possible sexual object like the slave in *The Hhareem*. Rather, she is being reprimanded by the harem master for acting against social norms and laws of the harem, and as such, changing the Orientalist interpretation to be more about the oppressive nature of Islamic customs on women. However, this aspect can still fall under eroticism of Orientalist paintings. The harem master and the male viewer can feel and imagine the dominance and control over the transgressing female. The implied following punishment can easily inspire fantasies as well.

**Edward William Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians***

In addition, Lewis’s paintings *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* are considered part of the Orientalist genre because he also used a popular book that was considered by the West in the 19\(^{th}\) century as the ultimate authority of modern life in Egypt. The book was by Edward William Lane and was titled *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* from 1836.\(^ {65}\) In his authoritative text, Lane attempted to dispel some of the popular Western European beliefs about Islamic society in Egypt. I have

\(^{63}\) Roberts, 44.  
\(^{64}\) Roberts, 44.  
\(^{65}\) Weeks, 27.
shown that places like the harem created imaginative fantasies for Victorians, however, according to Lane’s findings only five percent of married Egyptian men had more than one wife.\textsuperscript{66} Lane also provided the English with definitions for Arabic words, such as \textit{mandarah}, the lower level of a house reserved for the men’s quarters and gathering space, and \textit{mashrabiyya}, the wooden, lattice windows that conceal the women’s quarters upstairs. The \textit{mashrabiyya} can be seen in both \textit{The Hhareem} and \textit{An Intercepted Correspondence}, as well as in numerous other paintings by John Frederick Lewis and even other Orientalist artists.\textsuperscript{67}

Lane’s \textit{Modern Egyptians} inspired works by many artists because he was believed to have provided beneficial, factual information to the world. Because of Lane and his descriptions, many artists were able to successfully use his text to create Orientalist art without even having to leave their home.\textsuperscript{68} In \textit{Orientalism}, Edward Said described how Lane participated in Egyptian life when he said, “Lane’s authority was gained, not by virtue simply of what he said, but by virtue of how what he said could be adapted to Orientalism.”\textsuperscript{69} Thus, Lane’s perspective on Egyptian life and culture gave him authority in the eyes of the British by being knowledgeable, but also in furthering ideologies and constructed ideas known as Orientalism. Today, however, scholars are warned of blindly accepting Lane’s factualness. Tromans points out that Lane’s desire to create terminologies and secure static meaning does not respect the intricacies of an ancient and changing culture.\textsuperscript{70}

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 128.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Weeks, 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 84.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Said, 158.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 129.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
as representing the entire Western world’s desire to control ‘the other’ in this way. Similarly, it is equally difficult for scholars today to accept concrete interpretations of these paintings.

Though, Lewis did not usually provide much, if any, information to decipher his complex compositions, according to Weeks, Lewis’s paintings of convoluted allusions and imagined scenes, like *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence*, are decipherable when envisioned as engaging with Lane’s text and responding to it, rather than opposing it.\(^{71}\) Alternatively, it is speculated by Tromans that Lewis made repeated references to Lane’s text in his illustrations in order to avoid explanation of his narratives.\(^{72}\) By using Lane and his personal experience of living in Egypt, Lewis was able to mix accurate information with improbable situations. This perplexes critical viewers in their understanding of his intended meaning. Although artists were able to effectively use Lane’s perceptions of Egyptian culture, it only confirms that 19\(^{th}\) century Orientalist paintings were not factual renditions, but instead were British socially constructed ideas that were popular at the time. Thus, overall, it would appear that Lewis supported the concepts and ideals of Orientalism in numerous ways, including subject matter, style, meanings, and his use of literary references to Lane.

**Problems with the Orientalist Interpretation**

There are many weaknesses involved in using Orientalism to interpret Lewis’s works like *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence*. It is obvious that artists like John Frederick Lewis were creating works of “Orientalist” art before Orientalism

\(^{71}\) Weeks, 27-28.

\(^{72}\) Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 80.
became a form of knowledge and label. Therefore, artists like Lewis unknowingly received a loaded descriptor of “Orientalist artist” and everything that comes with it without being able to defend themselves or their true intentions or meanings. Nicholas Tromans summarized the ideas of modern scholars in the aftermath of Said, stating that Orientalism is “a pattern of repeated statements deceptively appearing to generate a form of knowledge that turns out to have no scientific basis.”

Said understood and expressed that Orientalism is based on the imperialism of a dominant Western culture colonizing an Eastern culture. Thus, the idea of Orientalism is constructed by the hegemonic culture of the West. I agree with that view, however, I also would argue that social constructs and their connotations could be more heavily applied in regards to Orientalist art and John Frederick Lewis specifically. This next section discusses, in particular, criticisms of Said’s Orientalism and the resulting problems of the colonial gaze. In addition, it examines the use of the erotic female for the male gaze as well as the interaction between the sexes for public viewing.

**Orientalism and the Colonial Gaze**

Said faced an impossible task in taking an authoritative stance on the Western view of the Orient. Weeks writes that Said was criticized for not including or ignoring issues of history, gender, class and things of that nature. His division between the East and West is just too reductive. She also agrees that Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism

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73 Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 85.
74 Said, 38-41.
75 Weeks, 24.
is excessively flawed and an inappropriate tool to pass judgment.\textsuperscript{76} Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk in \textit{Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods}, outline two particular problems with Said’s \textit{Orientalism}. The first is an “internal theoretical contradiction” of the history of Western society dominance and Orientalism as a tool for colonization.\textsuperscript{77} The one-sided Western dominance Said describes denies the possibility of mutual understanding by escaping discourses.\textsuperscript{78} The second problem is that with Said’s Westerners seeking to create Western identities, it is too homogenous, overlooking many aspects of culture and different cultural relations.\textsuperscript{79} It would follow then that Nochlin’s approach mentioned previously would therefore be as flawed as Said’s theory because she used his theory to write her article. I believe that Orientalism is a convoluted topic where anyone would have difficulty arguing a solid point. Orientalism encompasses so many ideas, including many cultures, societies, ethnicities and individuals, that there is no holistic way of covering it or using it.

Orientalism becomes a type of gaze, because in Orientalism the West is constructing the colonized East. Therefore, as part of that construction, they observe the East with a colonial, dominating gaze. This colonial gaze, in fact, seems to give the Victorian viewer power over its subjects. The gaze can be seen as how the West assumed control over the East ideologically through Orientalism, which led to cultural oppression. In terms of the gaze, Jacques Lacan introduced the idea of the gaze occurring in two worlds - there is the eye and the gaze.\textsuperscript{80} The art historian can use the gaze to study art,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Weeks, 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Hatt and Klonk, 230.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Hatt and Klonk, 230.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} Hatt and Klonk, 230.
  \item \textsuperscript{80} As summarized in Hatt and Klonk, 230.
\end{itemize}
seeing that the world and figures in the art are looking back at the viewer. This turns the viewer into an object as the viewer has, in turn, observed the object of art. However, art historians also consider the viewer’s gaze of a work of art and all that can imply. Hatt and Klonk state that this suggests that no view or interpretation is final because the viewer’s position is incomplete and something is always out of the viewer’s control. If the eye gives the illusion of mastery over an artwork, then the gaze equally alienates the viewer and denies their power as viewers. While Orientalism might suggest that Lewis’s perspective, because of his role in the dominant culture, could never escape his Western dominance, then it also suggests his artwork can only participate in perpetuating the ideological control over Egyptian societies as well. Yet, Lacan suggests that the gaze denies the viewer any power or dominance. It follows then that the colonial gaze like the one the West performed over the East while perhaps reflecting motivations does not really give control or power to the West and ignores alternative interpretations. Thus, Lacan’s respected theory suggests that the Victorian viewers had no dominating power. Plus, Lewis’s audiences did not understand what they were looking at in his paintings on many levels, including the fact that Lewis presented some authentic Egyptian culture mixed with improbable situations. Therefore, the colonial gaze creates a significant problem in defining Lewis’s paintings as Orientalist.

**Gender-Implied Gazes**

Using feminist theory, it is evident that both *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* as part of Orientalist art are full of gender-implied gazes. The male gaze

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81 Hatt and Klonk, 189.
82 Hatt and Klonk, 189.
is a second-wave feminist concept that describes another power structure created by social inequalities. The male gaze puts the male viewer in control of the female being portrayed in certain pictures. Margaret Olin discusses the male gaze in her essay, “Gaze,” saying, the male gaze is objectifying as well as voyeuristic towards women. Therefore, the heightened Victorian interest for harems scenes, or images depicting interaction between the genders, or views that seemed exotic or dangerous fed the desire of the male British bourgeois voyeuristically. Thus, artists took many liberties when painting Orientalist scenes because they were painting to supply the demand of the British viewers and their male, sexual fantasies.

In Lewis’s paintings, the gaze of the harem master is judgmental and controlling of the whole scene. His reaction is paramount to the narrative and understanding of the composition. In addition, in *The Hhareem*, the gaze of the harem master’s wives is scrutinizing and revealing of their feelings of jealousy or resentment of future competition towards the slave girl. Roberts points out that Lewis uses a vanishing point that puts the viewer at a vantage point in the room with all events unfolding before him, specifically and explicitly “him” of the masculine bourgeois. The critics were sure to make a distinction between content and form to support Lewis’s authority and knowledge of Egyptian culture, but as Robert’s points out, it provided justification for the male gaze to enjoy this scene voyeuristically. She suggests that because the viewers, especially male, knew of Lewis’s authority through Thackeray’s text, they could infer that Lewis

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83 Hatt and Klonk, 191.
85 Roberts, 35-36.
86 Roberts, 31.
was the harem master and therefore they were just *innocent* observers of the scene.\(^87\) The pleasure of unveiling the slave girl for the harem master is then adopted by the male Victorian viewer, who then also experiences the pleasure. To see a woman being dominated or controlled, such as in the painting, is erotic as well as a form of oppression because it leads to thinking that women are lesser than men. Moreover, Robert’s proposes that the male viewer can also claim the justification of authoritative distance as an observer.\(^88\) This means that while the male viewer is expected to be sexually interested in looking at the painting, he can argue that as a Western, white male he has the right to observe this painting and justify his claim as purely an interest in cultural studies.

Moreover, there are two different gazes by the primary female. In *The Hhareem*, the Abyssinian slave girl has a modest abashed gaze, which creates a dominant and sexual response in the male viewer. In comparison, in *An Intercepted Correspondence*, the girl found to have an illicit romance stares out at the viewer coyly. This elicits a different response from the male viewer to further participate in the fantasy. The reaction to these women by the male viewer is still considered objectification and voyeuristic in both paintings. The gaze of the male viewer to the women in both *The Hhareem* and in *An Intercepted Correspondence* was interpreted by Roberts as overseeing a “lingering on the pleasures of ‘Oriental luxury and ease.'”\(^89\) Yet, she also suggests that this viewer is so omniscient the he even has the power over other female viewers in the gallery where the work is being viewed.

\(^87\) Roberts, 36.
\(^88\) Roberts, 36.
\(^89\) Roberts, 36.
In addition, Roberts also writes about the gaze of the female viewer in regards to Orientalist works. She said that critics insisted that the Victorian female viewer passed the painting rapidly, revealing the female viewer’s gaze as “disengaged” and “not offended.”\(^90\) This is as if to say that she was uninterested in what happened in harems. However, this is clearly a misunderstanding on behalf of the critics because, as Roberts says, it was British women who offered the first insights inside harems through their travel logs, since Western men were not allowed into them.\(^91\) Victorian women had more to say about these paintings than just passing over them quickly, therefore showing they were not an indifferent audience that 19\(^{th}\) century critics assumed them to be.

Lewis’s role as an Orientalist artist is also due, in part, to the gaze he provides regarding the interactions between the sexes. These events rarely occurred in public for artists to witness and were, in fact, a breach of social norms for Egyptian citizens. In 19\(^{th}\) century Egypt, men and women were separated in almost all aspect of life. Lewis accounted for this distance in his paintings by the implication that the other gender was never far away. He did this by depicting various male clothing in scenes that only featured women characters or by depicting women’s slippers outside a room to infer the presence of a woman and the boundaries that other men could not cross. Lewis also liked to continually push scenarios in his paintings that would not exist in everyday Egyptian life. It is suggested by Tromans that the British were more likely to push these boundaries of acceptability.\(^92\) For example, he incorporates male and female characters together into...

\(^90\) Roberts, 36.
\(^91\) Roberts, 36.
\(^92\) Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 79. Tromans also claimed that the French Orientalist painter, Eugène Fromentin, warned his fellow French painters
images or at least puts them in close range of each other. Some of the females are even unveiled which would not occur with the mixing of genders. It would seem that the need of the artist to portray or imply the interaction between the sexes is again voyeuristic for his audience, especially the male ones. Therefore, a Victorian male viewer could again incorporate himself through the male gaze.

**Conclusion**

By complicating gender roles and entering paradoxes of authentic information about Islamic culture with improbably situations, Lewis confuses nationalist issues and his Orientalist label. Lewis’s images are colorful, naturalistic and full of interesting and imaginative information for his viewers to take in. It is clear why he has been grouped with other Orientalist painters through his subject matter and style, which implies many things, as discussed, about his colonial and Orientalist’s views. But in a closer examination of his works, this creates an unending series of questions. Was he really trying to illustrate a different aspect or viewpoint of Egyptian culture? Was he really trying to say something about the rights of women? Was he trying to create an illogical puzzle that his viewers eventually had to stop looking for answers? Lewis’s label as an Orientalist painter is suspect because of the improbable paradoxes he leaves for his viewers. I believe that Lewis purposefully challenged his viewers in regards to Orientalism, colonialism and gender by playing with social norms of Egyptian culture and leaving clues in the details of his paintings to allude to a further and deeper understanding. Although Said provided a fundamental keystone in the interpretation of to respect this culture from a distance by never representing or speaking of the bedroom or the mosque.
Lewis’s art, by abandoning the Orientalist perspective in an examination of Lewis’s paintings, like *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence*, new interpretations can be made that would argue that it is possible to escape Orientalist discourses. In the following chapter, I argue that John Frederick Lewis’s background in the hegemonic culture and his extended stay in the soon-to-be colonized Egypt has much to teach viewers about the effect of cross-cultural experience.
CHAPTER IV

JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS AND HYBRIDITY

I have shown that the typical application of the Orientalist theory for John Frederick Lewis’s works *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* presents numerous problems and inconsistencies. An alternative and better methodology for understanding Lewis can be found in the developed theory of Post-Colonialism. Although a debt of gratitude is owed to Said for creating the basis of this methodology, I will show it was his critical issues that fueled additional questions for the theory of Post-Colonialism to answer.

**Post-Colonialism and Hybridity**

Though imperial ambitions are not confined to the Victorian era, a more recent theory has emerged termed “Post-Colonialism.” Post-Colonialism refers to new methods for analyzing, discussing, explaining and responding to the legacy left behind from centuries of colonization and imperialism, from the moment the colonization took place to the present day.93 Moreover, Post-Colonialism refers to the social and political power that exists between colonized and colonizer. These methods work to create Post-Colonial identities for both the colonizers and the colonized, or decolonized cultures and individuals.

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93 Hatt and Klonk, 18.
Edward Said who coined ‘Orientalism’ is actually considered a key Post-Colonial theorist. In terms of Post-Colonialism, he was important for drawing attention to Post-Colonial identities and how they employ binaries between cultures - the Orient versus the West. This then raised the idea of how that binary structure can exist between any colonized cultures. It became clear that the European and white West was seen as the standard or the center by which other cultures were compared. Thus, the West becomes the norm and everyone else different becomes ‘the other.’ Post-Colonialism recognizes that these binaries have been socially or politically constructed and only exist within relation to the other and therefore cannot exist without each other, and as such, are not valid structures.

Therefore, Post-Colonialism works to look at history and culture with a reversal of these binaries. For example, instead of looking at history from the view of the western center of power or the colonizer, it seeks to look at it from the other marginalized side, previously the other. According to Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, “It challenges or questions authority of some voices, and demands that others be heard.” Thus, Post-Colonialism has the capacity to change perceptions of different cultures and the West’s relationship to them into a more authentic, equal and favorable light.

Furthermore, according to Hatt and Klonk, Post-Colonialism, “deals with the interaction between imperial and indigenous cultures,” rather than being a study of a

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95 Hatt and Klonk, 223.
particular culture. The identity of ‘the other’ or native is expectedly altered in every piece of the colonization process: colonization, decolonization and post-colonialism. In addition, the native identity is affected mostly by self-affirmation or compliance to colonial fabrications of foreign identities. Yet, Post-Colonialism importantly examines how both cultures are affected by colonization, which has developed into two branches of theory. One side examines the idea that the two cultures are always divergent and at odds. The other branch suggests that the two cultures, that of colonizer and colonized, are actually hybrid. This study focuses on the latter.

This strand of hybridity within Post-Colonialism holds that cultures do not exist in solidarity. Even the most remote cultures experience hybridity when discovered, encountered and ultimately interact with other cultures. This means that the two cultures do not remain separate, but that through their contact and conflicts, there is an ongoing form of blending and fusion. This cultural intersection can be voluntary, but throughout history has mostly occurred through forceful, violent colonization. Rohini Malik and Gavin Jantjes in *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980* define hybridity as “a state of being, arrived at through the innovative mixing and borrowing of ideas, languages and modes of practices.” Therefore, when separate cultures interact, they mold and shape each other into different and perhaps evolved entities. David Craven in his essay, “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art; A Post-Colonial Approach to

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96 Hatt and Klonk, 224.
98 Hatt and Klonk, 225.
‘American’ Art” describes this interaction as “dialogical,” meaning there is a synthesis between the two cultures.\textsuperscript{100}

Although hybridity is a transaction of cross-cultural experiences that can better aid in understanding cultural lines, it also has its flaws. Hybridity is complex, like Orientalism, and according to Tromans, even contradictory because the idea of hybridity is cleaner when it is abstract instead of applied to the complex “entanglement . . . in actual historical situations.”\textsuperscript{101} For example, one might ask if hybridity really challenges European domination or if is it a more complex form of primitivism? As such, Annie E. Coombes states in her essay, “Inventing the ‘Postcolonial’: Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating,” that museums and scholars are battling with this dilemma in utilizing Orientalism or hybridity since all objects continue to be viewed on a Western-based scale of aesthetic critique.\textsuperscript{102} Furthermore, James Clifford in \textit{Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods} warns that ultimately the scholar must be careful of using hybridity as a term for describing an affinity of humanity or to homogenize the geopolitical climate.\textsuperscript{103} Many scholars take issue with the idea that there is something that transcends all social and cultural differences and that there would be serious racial and cultural issues involved in assuming so. Hybridity then must be carefully observed within a desired social and political climate.

To discuss hybridity within a desired social and political climate, one should define the era in which the hybridity is to be observed in order to outline factors of

\textsuperscript{100} Craven, 45.
\textsuperscript{101} Benjamin, 87.
\textsuperscript{103} Hatt and Klonk, 231.
political involvement and social interactions of the two cultures, as I have done in chapter two. Culture is not created in a vacuum and therefore is adaptable to change. Hybridity is not a complex form of primitivism, because is not one culture observing and taking inspiration from another. The blending or fusion of two cultures is an example of them both changing and adapting from their intersections. For this study, I do not suggest that hybridity is a cultural perception that universally transcends cultural differences, and therefore I agree that hybridity is not a term for homogenization. Perhaps, in the case John Frederick Lewis and the perception of him being a part of white, Western domination the judgment was passed too soon.

Hybridity - New Interpretations of Lewis’s Art

I argue that John Frederick Lewis is not an Orientalist artist, but rather is a representative of the theory of hybridity. As mentioned previously, Lewis was unique for his time of ten years spent in Egypt. William Makepeace Thackeray portrayed Lewis as having fully assimilated into the Egyptian lifestyle because he lived in a part of town away from other Europeans or European travelers. In addition, he dressed in Egyptian embroidered jackets and gaiters, loose fitting pants, wearing a scimitar and sporting fezzes. He even married an Egyptian woman. It is clear that Lewis was no longer the English dandy that he was once known as, but neither was he the Turkish bey that Thackeray made him out to be. Instead, using the theory of Post-Colonialism, I propose that Lewis and his art were a hybrid of the two cultures. By mixing cultural practices of
two different cultures, he is the quintessential model for the new “state of being” in hybridity.\(^\text{104}\)

Although Lewis retained aspects of his own culture while abroad, few other artists were as accepting of things from the new culture. Henri Matisse, an early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century painter, visited Orientalist sites like Africa that influenced his work. After his trip, Matisse said, “As a painter I saw many interesting subjects . . . but I know that one must spend several years in these countries in order to extract something new and that one cannot just take one’s palette and one’s system and apply it."\(^\text{105}\) Matisse is referring to the fact that many European artists were unable to learn things about the foreign culture they visited because they were there for such a short time, as well as that their modes of style of painting were inadequate for representing what they did not know. Matisse might have shown through his works that he was influenced and borrowed elements from foreign places, but he never immersed himself in the culture or assimilated it, he remained French. Lewis’s lifestyle and lengthy time in Egypt, on the other hand, show he attempted to learn about the culture of the colonized, relinquishing any cultural superiority, even if only temporary. Lewis spent a significant amount of time submerged in an alternative culture, which gave him an exceptional perspective because he was essentially socializing himself with another culture.

Orientalism, according to Said, was a one-sided experience of the West constructing or influencing the East, but with the new lens of hybridity it is possible to also see Lewis’s art and paintings as a dialogical communication between the two cultures. According to Benjamin, Said states that people of the Middle East used art like a

\(^{104}\) McDaniel and Robertson, 48.
\(^{105}\) As cited in Benjamin, 92.
language to talk back to their colonizer.\textsuperscript{106} Very few, but some native Muslims took up Orientalist painting, according to Benjamin. By doing so, these artists expressed the capacity to act freely, not by taking up Western traditions, but through the ability to do such paintings even though the Prophet Muhammad declared figural images as sacrilegious. Homi Bhabha suggests that the mental life of indigenous people in colonial situations lived out the Western impression of themselves “in order to retain a space for the self.”\textsuperscript{107} Scholars see this today as Egyptian painters talking back to the colonizer or Western painter and his representations, which thus encourages cultural dialogue. This is similar to what the Western colonizers did in Orientalism - defining themselves by defining others.

Through hybridity, on the other hand, art can produce or reflect a new identity or meaning, suggesting there is no absolute difference between self and others.\textsuperscript{108} Instead, there is a new fusion or synthesis of the two. John Frederick Lewis, for example, came from the perspective of the colonizer, but he was never that innately different from the people he observed and lived with during his time in Cairo, and as such, created paintings that show his hybrid identity. This new outlook provides potential transformation to the very meaning of John Frederick Lewis’s artwork because he was representing his unique cross-cultural experience, which is hybridity. Although it is a much later artistic movement, David Craven shows that this similar idea can be applied to the art of the Abstract Expressionists. He argues that the artists’ interactions with Native American and Afro-American cultures and their art created a new “synthesis of hegemonic values with

\textsuperscript{106} Benjamin, 87.
\textsuperscript{107} Benjamin, 87. He also states that Homi Bhabha was inspired by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon and psychoanalytical theory.
\textsuperscript{108} McDaniel and Robertson, 48.
subordinate ideological tendencies, out of which broader signification is constructed.”

This means that the Abstract Expressionists exhibited hybridity in their artwork through interactions with Native American and Afro-American art, bringing new light to cross-cultural exchange. These artists did not even live in these cultures and assimilate to them like Lewis. I will, therefore, reexamine Lewis’s two works discussed in chapter three as Orientalist and shed light on how they are, instead, reflections of the artist’s hybridity between European and Egyptian culture.

*The Hhareem*

By analyzing the details of John Frederick Lewis’s painting *The Hhareem* with a lens of hybridity, it is possible to discover much more about Lewis’s cross-culture experience than 19th century viewers even had the capability to understand. One aspect that can be considered is the title itself, *The Hhareem*. Victorian viewers relied on descriptive titles to explain what they were supposed to be seeing, so titles of artworks were meant to serve this purpose. While it is obvious in Lewis’s painting that they are viewing a scene of a harem, it is important to note that the title is spelled with a double “h.” This is more accurate to the Arabic pronunciation of the word “harem.” Therefore, Lewis is creating intersections between the Victorian culture and the Egyptian one even in the title as part of his hybridity.

As mentioned in chapter three, Lewis appears to push boundaries in depicting scenes outside his cultural experience, such as a harem fantasy with multiple wives.

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109 Craven, 45.
110 Weeks, 31.
111 Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 132.
Using a lens of hybridity, there are actually explanations and new interpretation for this relating to issues of slavery. What is known about Lewis and his time in Egypt and his repeated references and use of Edward William Lane’s text show Lewis’s competence concerning the contemporary social climate. Lane reports that Islamic law allowed for four wives and concubines until polygamy was outlawed in 1926, but also that the majority did not experience polygamy. In fact, only 5% of marriages consisted of more than one wife.\textsuperscript{112} It is known that Lewis interacted directly with Lane’s text, making these aspects of this scene implausible and imagined by Lewis. Also, men were not allowed into harems and Westerners were regarded with suspicion, therefore the chance of Lewis ever actually seeing the inside of a harem would have been near impossible. I argue that these clues about Lewis show he was consciously aware of the social and political climate of contemporary times and that he created the composition of \textit{The Hhareem} with the purpose of making commentary on that climate of slavery and women’s rights.

Lewis had a deep understanding of the social climate of Islamic culture and he shows it in the details that he revealed about the harem wives. During an exhibit in London, Lewis described each of the wives’ ethnicity, their light skin tones telling the viewer these women were also previously concubines or slaves from other countries, like Greece, where the slave trade was heavily populated from. Tromans says this makes this painting as much about slavery and race as it is about gender.\textsuperscript{113} Lewis renders the three wives in typical Orientalist form: ornately and decoratively. Their fabrics are so similar to the fabric of the furniture they are sitting on that they practically become part of the furniture. Moreover, as further evidence, twenty-three years later in 1873 John Frederick

\textsuperscript{112}Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 128.
\textsuperscript{113}Tromans, “Harem and Home,” 132.
Lewis created an artwork called *A Lady Receiving Visitors* or *The Reception* around the same time the British government began aiding these white, enslaved harem women. Thus, Lewis purposefully addressed the race of these enslaved women from the prominent countries that produced slaves.

Although the Orientalist interpretation of this painting embodies notions of male fantasy and sexual excess, with a view of Lewis’s hybridity it can better be seen as a commentary on the slave trade. The harem itself is a recognizable and prevailing symbol of sexual power for Western viewers and I argue it was used by Lewis to grab the attention of his Victorian viewers. In *The Hhareem*, Lewis depicted a man with three wives who is considering purchasing a slave to later become his fourth. Lewis was more forthcoming about the details of this painting than any other of his works in telling his audience about the harem wives and their ethnicities to show that they were once purchased as slaves too. Their presence and race is crucial to the scrutiny of the slave girl in the center and the understanding that Lewis is being critical of the slave trade. Lewis knew enough about his adopted culture by this time to incorporate social and political commentary in his paintings. This shows knowledge and use of hybridity of both cultures, mixing traditional, Victorian styles of paintings and Egyptian social issues incorporated into one composition.

In addition, in considering the Arabic aesthetic and architectural lattice windows or *mashrabiyyas* in *The Hhareem*, it becomes evident that they have more symbolic significance with hybridity than allowing light or erotic gazes in. As discussed earlier, *mashrabiyyas* were used to conceal harem walls in order for the women inside to have

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114 Weeks, 30.
light and to keep the gaze of outsiders out. In the painting, they cover the entirety of the left wall and can be seen at the end of the hall. With his time in Egypt, he was more than familiar with the lattice windows that seem to be generously shading and light giving at the same time. I suggest that this distinct architecture not only identifies itself as Arabic, but it can also be a symbol for the perforation of culture. As Lewis incorporated Arabic pronunciation into his title, the windows may also symbolize that same cultural transaction; the giving and taking of one’s culture with another and the delicate circumstances of which each culture conceals and reveals itself. This is just like how one can see out the windows and yet the light can come in and out too. Therefore, the lattice windows in both Lewis’s *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* are a symbol of hybridity because they act as a representation of fusion in his cross-cultural experience.

Another issue to reexamine in *The Hhareem* with the new lens of hybridity includes Lewis’s composition in the painting, which I suggest was done to challenge the viewer. While this painting can seem chaotic in all of its details, the composition keeps the organization structurally sound. The figures are grouped in a double pyramidal structure and those two pyramids create two focal points. The male servant and the new slave form one and the harem master and his wives create the other. The male servant glances at the harem master who stares at the slave girl, tying the two pyramids together. Also, the right angles of the room help keep the composition orderly. As stated earlier, the perspective of the painting invites the viewer in and the orderly composition makes the narrative for the viewer more accessible and understandable. Roberts writes that:

> [T]hese later paintings were perceived by some critics as having transgressed the parameters of acceptable representation of the subject. These later works explore
alternative harem fantasies and how they allow [the viewer] to reinterpret the way spectatorship functions.\textsuperscript{115}

Roberts is commenting on how Lewis created the scene and how it began to upset Victorian viewers because it, as opposed to other Orientalist paintings, began challenging the viewers to see these scenes as more than entertainment. By using his composition to challenge the viewer, Lewis is also challenging the gaze. He is challenging his audience to look at this painting as an ethnographic document, like he did himself.\textsuperscript{116}

The gaze is a key issue in addressing Lewis’s complex painting, calling attention to notions of male fantasy and sexual excess because it can easily be accounted for as the male, objectifying gaze. As discussed previously, however, gaze denies the Victorian viewer power over its subjects. Therefore, the gaze for Lewis’s viewers is no longer represented voyeuristically but ethnographically. According to Roberts, seeing \textit{The HHareem} as Lewis challenging his viewers redefines the harem fantasy and the viewer’s perception of it.\textsuperscript{117} Lewis denies the Victorian viewers their desired fantasy and challenges them to see his painting in an authentic manner; as a commentary on the slave trade, not a sexual fantasy. This means the viewer can no longer justify voyeurism through distance. In this interpretation, Lewis’s authority as a knowledgeable artist on Egyptian culture is given a lot of weight, but his knowledge of the social climate of slavery especially encourages trust. It would appear that Lewis was posing advanced questions to his 19\textsuperscript{th} century Victorian audience who failed to answer due to their lack of hybridity.

\textsuperscript{115} Roberts, 37.  
\textsuperscript{116} Roberts, 39.  
\textsuperscript{117} Roberts, 39.
Lewis also reveals his new state of being or hybridity by addressing ideals of beauty and gender roles in *The Hhareem*. Since gender issues play a key role in the many challenges Lewis gave his audience, he incorporated yet another display of cultural awareness by adding two gazelles. One gazelle is in the bottom right and the other is on the left side of the painting on the couch near the harem master. A gazelle was a common household pet and an indigenous animal to the region. More importantly, the gazelle was also used in a common saying that referred to the beauty of a woman if she had eyes like a gazelle’s. For a woman wearing a veil, her eyes are still visible, therefore making that part of her body the object from which her beauty is measured. I suggest that this cultural anecdote shows Lewis’s engagement in the culture as well as posing questions to his Victorian viewers about gender roles and notions of beauty. His marriage would suggest that he found Egyptian women beautiful, therefore, perhaps Lewis was challenging his Western audience to question the definition of beauty. I suggest he was showing that a woman did not have to be white and British to be beautiful. Gender roles were a large part of and crucial to Egyptian society as will be discussed in the following section.

*An Intercepted Correspondence*

As discussed in chapter three, nineteen years later Lewis created *An Intercepted Correspondence* using a similar composition as *The Hhareem*, while also attempting to accentuate a different aspect of gender within the seemingly Orientalist painting. One significant difference in the two paintings mentioned was the change in the harem master,

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118 Weeks, 25.
119 Weeks, 25.
where he is now an old man with a huge, white beard. This man appears in many of Lewis’s paintings and actually resembles photographs of Lewis taken in Egyptian garb (Figure 5 and 6). I suggest this could be Lewis more clearly incorporating himself into his sociopolitical compositions. Lewis’s desire to look more Egyptian and fit into his adopted culture is just one of the many cultural intersections observed in his life that he then transferred into his paintings and are examples of hybridity. Although it would appear Lewis is putting himself in as an Orientalist voyeur, I suggest he does this to show his cultural fusion and resulting authority to show these subjects with a new meaning.

In her essay discussing Orientalist art, Linda Nochlin unknowingly supports the theory of hybridity with regards to Lewis incorporating himself into his paintings. Nochlin says, “There are never any Europeans in ‘picturesque’ views of the Orient like these. Indeed, it might be said that one of the defining features of Orientalist painting is its dependence for its very existence on a presence that is always an absence: the Western colonial or touristic presence.” It is typical in Orientalist art that the viewer is implied to be the Western presence, but Lewis cuts out implications by simply adding himself into a number of his compositions. Lewis added his Western presence into purely Egyptian scenes to show his own authority and the authentication of his cross-cultural experience.

The second major difference between the two paintings is that there are now two women as the center focus rather than the one Abyssinian slave, and one of them has committed a breach of gender social norms. The two women are more clothed than the nearly nude slave girl in The Hhareem. Both the slave girl and the two women catch the

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120 Nochlin, 291.
viewers attention first because they are near the focal point of Lewis’s use of one-point linear perspective. However, the slave girls stands out more because there is a greater contrast between lights and darks. The two women in *An Intercepted Correspondence* are in the middle of a conflict, where one woman has been found out having an illicit romance or conversation outside the harem. The same servant man can still be seen behind these two women, peeking his head out between them and smiling. Moreover, these women stand out because they are not like the wives, sitting near the harem master, who are almost insignificant to the fabric that surrounds them.

This change to the composition is crucially important because Lewis specifically portrays his women characters in this way, calling attention to and challenging what Victorian society imagined Egyptian women to be. Thus, it is significant that the two women in the center are the focus and are in direct contrast to the stereotype of Islamic wives who were to be silent and decorative in the domestic scene. In an Orientalist perspective, this explanation for a change in focus or meaning could be meant to infer that by viewing these images, Victorian women in the 19th century were to feel more secure about their own status and privileges within Western society. Although their rights were miniscule to the opportunities available to women today, it is known that Victorian women enjoyed a few privileges and freedoms that Egyptian women did not. However, using the lens of hybridity, Lewis’s painting shows that women’s roles of the 19th century were actually more similar than different despite perceived differences. They both lived in patriarchal cultures, experiencing unequal rights and were considered to be property of men.

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121 Weeks, 32.
122 Weeks, 30.
Another significant factor regarding this different focus in Lewis’s painting is that the public display of independence by women in a man’s presence (that was especially directed towards him) would not have been allowed in Egyptian culture at the time. Fatema Mernissi touches on an argument in her essay, saying that when women are not where they are supposed to be, they are creating acts of aggression against men who cannot ignore the order of their patriarchal system. Lewis challenges this Egyptian element by not portraying his women on the edges of scenes (an appropriate place of independence), but rather at the center of some disturbance. Lewis also challenges the Orientalist, Victorian notion that harem women are weak and in need of saving. Both Tromans and Weeks recognize that Lewis’s women in this painting are not in need of aid nor are they oppressed. Lewis’s female characters as seen in An Intercepted Correspondence are women designated with a different sort of identity than Victorian viewers would have assumed them to have. Thus, Lewis has created a hybrid of Western notions of Egyptian feminism and domesticity with representations that challenge that view or stereotype.

In addition, Lewis also uses the different focus in An Intercepted Correspondence to address cultural issues of the mixing of genders. The women lie on the outskirts of Lewis’s paintings only taking focus when they are part of some social disturbance, so this is how Lewis is able to bring the genders together in the painting. Lewis also accounted for separation of the genders in other ways by implying that one gender, if not pictured, was overhearing, or within earshot of the scene. For example, the mashrabiyyas

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123 Weeks, 30.
124 Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 82.
125 Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 82; and Weeks, 30.
126 Tromans, “Genre and Gender in Cairo and Constantinople,” 82.
created the perfect architectural conditions for which to be overheard. As mentioned previously, slippers are a powerful symbol within the harem because they imply the presence of either gender. A pair of female slippers, placed outside a door, marked her presence in a house or harem and prohibited a husband’s entrance, marking the boundary of male authority and suggesting partial or limited female independence. As stated earlier, according to Fatema Mernissi, women commit acts of aggression against men when they are not where they are supposed to be. In other words, the social separation of men and women in Islamic culture was so enforced that it was seen as an act of aggression to disobey it. I suggest that through the mixing of the genders and roles in the harem scene, Lewis calls attention to both patriarchal systems in Egypt and England as part of his dialogical approach.

Another example of Lewis pushing boundaries through his hybridity is that his women characters are mostly unveiled. This is evident in both An Intercepted Correspondence and The Hhareem. For Arabic women to be unveiled, it would mean that she was in the presence of only women or her husband. It is customary in public for women to wear veils because they define the wearer as a conservative member of the Islamic community. Yet, as mentioned previously, Lewis often implies that both genders are present even if they are not visible in the paintings. Moreover, the artist’s male presence is always implied, but in An Intercepted Correspondence Lewis cuts out that implication by placing himself in Egyptian garments as the harem master; yet at the same time he is the artist and the Victorian, Western viewer. I suggest that by unveiling his Egyptian women, Lewis is stripping them of another perceived great difference between

that of his subjects and the British women that would have viewed these paintings. I believe Lewis’s choice to portray his women in his compositions as mostly unveiled is his attempt to challenge the gaze again. Not only is it a purposeful choice by the artist, who knows this foreign culture better than most of his peers, but it also calls attention to one of the major perceived differences between the two cultures, which is the treatment of the genders. Using the symbol of the veil, Lewis calls attention to the separation of the genders and gender social norms as an act of hybridity. He is creating spaces for which social norms are performed and then denying them, ultimately showing that perhaps the perceived major differences were not that different at all.

While there was no physical separation of the genders per se in 19th century Britain, there was a gross inequality problem and control over women that was exerted through social oppression, and women were relegated to the domestic sphere. Lewis’s hybrid perspective from the rapidly changing industrialized Britain to colonized Egypt provided the framework for him to create these scenes that draw attention to conceptions of differences between Egyptian women and British women. He is calling attention to the fact that the differences are not that great. Even further, he is showing that the differences between self and others that create normative society are perhaps not that different either. Thus, Lewis’s hybridity of cultures allowed him to make images that created discussions for the future and what hybridity could look like. It suggests societies where women possess power, challenging 19th century conventions of domesticity in both Egypt and Britain.

Therefore, Lewis’s rendering of women is a key understanding to the failings of Orientalism as his identifying label. These last two differences would suggest that he did
not merely paint harem scenes containing both genders to appease British audience’s demands, but rather he placed his characters in positions to show Lewis knew social norms in Egypt from Lane and then purposefully disobeyed them. In doing this, his female characters upended the notions Victorian viewers may have had on the lifestyles of Egyptian women. Thus, these deliberate choices reflect the synthesis of a cross-cultural approach by Lewis rather than an Orientalist perspective.

Conclusion

The many issues of Orientalism that led to Post-Colonial theory also led to the discussion of Lewis’s paintings using the theory of hybridity. There is much to discover in Lewis’s paintings about the transactions in cross-cultural experiences. Lewis’s pictorial representation of those experiences addresses questions of the colonial gaze, the male gaze and feminist theory, especially the domesticity of women in 19th century Europe and Egypt. Tromans states it best when he writes:

Lewis’s harem pictures weave between European models, and presumed Oriental models, of domestic life to create a kind of visual hybrid that is finally irreducible to any ‘position’ or opinion other than an apparent delight in showing us so much but refusing, in the end, to tell us anything for certain . . . [Tracing] the limits of what might be done by a Western artist confronting the Orient . . . 128

Without using the theory of hybridity, Tromans recognizes the poignant point that Lewis is mixing cultural models. In that mixing, Lewis pulls back the curtain on Western cultural assumptions and challenges his audience’s preconceived notions. Tromans also suggests that perhaps Lewis reached the epitome of what a Western artist of his time was

capable. Since then, scholars have picked up where Lewis left off and continue to explore the understanding and interpretations of cross-cultural experience.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It was John Frederick Lewis’s life not his paintings that first fascinated British citizens in the 19th century because of William Thackeray’s published travel logs. Lewis’s paintings did not appear until after his ten-year engagement with Egyptian society that inspired his work. Since scholars such as Linda Nochlin have begun to reevaluate the importance of the Romantic, Orientalist painting, the content of Lewis’s paintings has become subject to interpretation. By using Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, scholars saw Lewis’s harem scenes as cultural studies of Western domination and cultural superiority. Therefore, *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* exuded male, British voyeurism and sexual fantasy.

However, in my own fascination for Lewis’s Egyptian-like lifestyle and so-called Orientalist paintings, my research brings to light a different perspective with regards to his rare and unique cultural experience. By being one of the few artists that experienced long-term cultural exposure in a foreign country Lewis unknowingly elected himself to become the example of the theory of hybridity. In an examination of his paintings *The Hhareem* and *An Intercepted Correspondence* and various sources about Lewis, this study reveals his intricate understanding of Egyptian manners and customs as well as a dialogue with Edward William Lane’s publication on Egyptian culture. Although Lewis left behind paradoxes of cultural understanding and improbable situations within his compositions, these begin to unravel providing new understanding and interpretations for his works, especially when paired with personal details of the artist’s life.
Twenty-first century perspectives of John Frederick Lewis’s 19th century paintings are completely capable of being human and imperfect. Although Lewis uses Lane as a source and they are both perceived by British society to be absolute in their authority, these perceptions are fallible. Orientalism, as well, reaches a point where scholars feel they can go no further. Orientalism failed because neither side could escape the discourses and see beyond their own culture. The images left behind by John Frederick Lewis show a conflicting world where the viewer may be lost to the intricate details. This overwhelming sensation parallels the feeling of facing “Orientalism” because there are so many factors to address, one could simply give up. Although like John Frederick Lewis, an outsider, whether a person is Western or Eastern, cannot fully know a different culture, but in attempting to understand it, there is the possibility to escape the discourses. Like Lewis, they can traverse the undefined areas where cultures are shaped. John Frederick Lewis’s life escapes any means of definition as Week’s was previously quoted stating, “Not quite the average Egyptian, and no longer overtly British.”\textsuperscript{129} It should then be obvious that he is most often discussed as things he is not. Thus, that is a strong indicator that Lewis, in fact, did escape the discourses of Orientalism. Lewis, knowingly or not, refused to become an illustrator of the Orientalist ideology. Therefore, it is within Post-Colonial studies that the theory of Orientalism and Lewis find a more evolved home.

John Frederick Lewis, therefore, stands out as a hopeful example of hybridity by focusing on his relation between cultures. Every culture including those in the East and the West separately perform and create their own culture. When those cultures interact or

\textsuperscript{129} Weeks, 26.
encounter each other, they shape and change each other because cultures do not exist in solidarity. Hybridity is, therefore, closer to describing the lifestyle of John Frederick Lewis and his artwork that became both British and Egyptian through birth and osmosis. His life and artistic career are perfect examples when seeking to understand how different cultures relate and shape people.

The most poignant example of Lewis’s portrayal of cultural intersection is implied in his images of Egypt where men’s fantasies were upended and women were permitted power, threatening the very conventions of contemporary society. Although this was perceived as one of the greatest difference between Eastern and Western cultures, Lewis was mimicking modern problems of British society. Egypt and London were places where John Frederick Lewis felt very much at home. Lewis’s painting style, the scenes he chose to depict, and the city in which he painted them (painting Egyptian scenes from his London home), challenges not only the viewer to question everything they thought they knew, but also to challenge them to see their societies as Lewis’s saw them: not really that different.

All of humanity may not be homogenous and there is no easy answer to the many facets and difficulties in breaching cultural norms. If ever there was a good time for the British to explore their relationship with Middle Eastern countries, perhaps the 19th century was the last great frontier because of the emerging modern society and the contemporary political climate. Perhaps it is best that scholars cannot be assured of anything when studying art with Post-Colonialism. The metaphorical wall that scholars have reached with Lewis’s artwork and the artist himself presents to his viewers the barrier that marks as far as the viewer can go in confronting cultural differences, and
perhaps similarly as far as Lewis himself could go. However, I have shown in this study that Lewis went as far as any Westerner could go or hoped to go during his time period. Thus, it is clear that by using the lens of hybridity, Lewis was an important artist who made a significant contribution to 19th century art.
ILLUSTRATIONS
Figure 1: *The Death of Sardanapalus*, Eugène Delacroix, 1827, Philadelphia Museum of Art, oil on canvas.
Figure 2: *The Women of Algiers (in Their Apartment)*, Eugène Delacroix, 1834, Louvre, oil on canvas.
Figure 4: *An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo*, John Frederick Lewis, 1869, oil on panel, whereabouts unknown.
Figure 5: *John Frederick Lewis in Oriental Costume*, Undated Photograph, Private Collection.
Figure 6: *John Frederick Lewis in Oriental Costume*, Undated Photograph, Trustees of the Royal Watercolor Society.
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